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USDA 1996 Farm Bill

April 1996

Overview

Conservation Provisions

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United States Department of Agriculture

The 1996 Farm Bill's Commitment To Conservation

The conservation provisions in the 1996 Farm Bill will affect farmers well into the next century. The new provisions build on the conservation gains made by landowners over the past decade. They simplify existing programs and create new programs to address high priority environmental protection goals. Here is a quick summary of some of the key provisions:

- The new **Environmental Quality Incentives Program** consolidates the functions of four existing conservation programs into one and focuses assistance to locally-identified conservation priority areas or areas where agricultural improvements will help meet water quality goals. In fiscal year 1996, \$130 million will be available. After that, the program will be funded at \$200 million annually. Funds will pay for technical assistance and cost-sharing on conservation practices. Fifty percent of the funds are dedicated to conservation associated with livestock operations.
- The popular **Wetlands Reserve Program** and **Conservation Reserve Program** are extended through 2002. Changes provide landowners more options for protecting wetlands and highly erodible lands. In the Wetlands Reserve Program, landowners will now be able to choose either permanent or 30-year easements, or restoration only cost-share agreements.
- A new **Farmland Protection Program** will provide up to \$35 million to help farmers preserve their land in agriculture. The program provides assistance to states with existing farmland protection programs to purchase conservation easements.
- Current **Swampbuster and wetlands provisions** from the 1985 and 1990 Farm Bills were modified to provide farmers with more flexibility to meet wetland conservation compliance requirements. Changes include expanding areas where mitigation can be used, allowing mitigation by restoration, enhancement or creation, and changing the abandonment clause.
- The new **Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program** provides \$50 million over the next seven years to help landowners improve wildlife habitat on private lands.
- **Conservation Compliance** was changed to direct USDA employees who are providing on-site technical assistance to notify landowners if they observe potential compliance problems. Landowners will have up to one year to take corrective action. County Committees are authorized to provide relief in cases of economic hardship.
- A **Flood Risk Reduction Program** was established that allows farmers who voluntarily enter into contracts to receive payments on lands with high flood potential. In return, participants agree to forego certain USDA program benefits. These contract payments provide incentives to move farming operations from frequently flooded land.
- The **Emergency Watershed Protection Program** was amended to allow the purchase of **Floodplain Easements**.
- The new **Conservation of Private Grazing Land** initiative offers landowners technical, educational and related assistance on the Nation's 642 million acres of private grazing lands.
- The **National Natural Resources Conservation Foundation** is created as a nonprofit corporation to fund research, education and demonstration projects related to conservation.
- Membership in the **State Technical Committees**, the group which provides guidance on technical standards for conservation programs, was broadened to include agricultural producers and others knowledgeable about conservation.
- A new **Conservation Farm Option** was created for producers of wheat, feed grains, upland cotton, and rice who are eligible for Agriculture Market Transition Contracts. Under this pilot program, landowners may consolidate their CRP, WRP, and EQIP payments into one annual payment. The participants enter into a 10-year contract and agree to adopt a conservation farm plan.
- Under the interagency **Wetlands Memorandum of Agreement**, the definition of agricultural land was expanded to include not only cropland and pastureland, but also rangeland, native pastureland, other land used to support livestock production, and tree farms.

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